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"TO EXPLORE THOROUGHLY THE SCRIPTURES AND THEIR MEANING . . . TO UNDERSTAND AS FULLY AS POSSIBLE THE WORLD IN WHICH THE CHURCH LIVES AND HAS HER MISSION . . . TO PROVIDE A VEHICLE FOR COMMUNICATING THE MEANING OF GOD'S WORD TO OUR CONTEMPORARY WORLD."
—EDITORIAL POLICY STATEMENT, JULY, 1967

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THE WONDROUS GRACE OF GOD

FROM THE EDITOR

The top priority of* Mission*'s agenda is the proclamation of the good news that we are loved in spite of our unloveliness, accepted in spite of being unacceptable, forgiven in spite of our guilt, secure in spite of our misunderstandings, and endowed with meaning in spite of the seeming meaninglessness of the human situation. For only a theology that takes seriously human misunderstandings and imperfections, on the one hand, and the saving grace of God, on the other, can truly legitimate a journal dedicated to the open exploration of the meaning of our faith.

They made her stand before the group and said to Jesus, "Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery. In the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?"....

But Jesus bent down and started to write on the ground with his finger. When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, "If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her." Again he stooped down and wrote on the ground.

At this, those who heard began to go away one at a time, the older ones first, until only Jesus was left, with the woman still standing there. Jesus straightened up and asked her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?"

"No one, sir," she said.

"Then neither do I condemn you," Jesus declared. "Go now and leave your life of sin." — John 8:3-11, New International Version

For a long time now, I have been convinced that Christianity hangs suspended by two fundamental realities: the imperfections, finitude,and limitations of man, underscored by his inevitable death; and the absolute perfection, grandeur, and infinity of the Almighty God, who alone is able to save.

Further, apart from these two realities, a deep and abiding awareness of the good news of God's saving grace eludes us.

These are not logical propositions to be debated, proven, and then intellectually believed. They rather are realities which we all too often seek to deny.

Most of us simply do not wish to admit that we are frail and finite sinners. We diligently try to ignore the fact that we are creatures of history and culture whose understandings and perceptions are inevitably flawed. We attempt to cover over our unrighteousness with good works, as if hundreds and thousands of good works could really alter our fundamental alienation from God.

In other words, we wish to be gods and not persons.

Is it any wonder, then, that we so seldom hear sermons on God's saving grace? Is it any wonder that Christianity is so often principally defined, both from the pulpit and the pew, as a body of laws to which we must submit, as though we could save ourselves?

This, to be sure, is the universal dilemma of humankind to which Scripture speaks from its opening scenes in the Garden of Eden to its closing scenes in Revelation.

Given the enormity of the dilemma, surely it is appropriate for *Mission* to address this problem in the months ahead. And *Mission* will.

I am convinced that this one issue is at the heart of practically every other issue that besets us, both as a church and as individual Christians. For example, how many Christians suffer profound mental anguish because they have not learned to let God be God and to accept the love and grace that He alone can give? How many congregations have divided in bitterness and rancor because their members are unable to extend the same grace to their brethren that God extends to them?

There are literally millions of Christians who can talk a great line about these realities, but who find it extremely difficult to internalize them, and so peace, tranquility, and security lie always outside their grasp.

This is why Luther felt that "this doctrine [of God's grace] can never be taught, urged, and repeated enough." And Luther was right.

The things I have written above, I have written with deliberate care. For I earnestly hope that this first issue of *Mission* which I have edited will symbolize to all who may read it the top priority of *Mission*'s agenda. And that priority is simply the proclamation of the good news that we are loved in spite of our unloveliness, accepted in spite of being unacceptable, forgiven in spite of our guilt, secure in spite of our misunderstandings, and endowed with meaning in spite of the seeming meaninglessness of the human situation.

Surely this priority is in fundamental keeping with *Mission*'s editorial policy statement of July, 1967: "to explore thoroughly the Scriptures and their meaning . . . to understand as fully as possible the world in which the church lives and has her mission . . . to provide a vehicle for communicating the meaning of God's word to our contemporary world."

Further, only a theology that takes seriously human misunderstandings and imperfections, on the one hand, and the saving grace of God, on the other, can truly legitimate a journal dedicated to the open exploration of the meaning of our faith.

Clearly, God's grace does not warrant deliberate wallowing in imperfections and misunderstandings. Paul spoke to that issue when he asked, "What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? By no means!"

But God's grace allows us to admit that we are human, and to stop pretending that we are gods. God's grace allows us frankly to admit to our misunderstandings and to press on in our search for truth. This is why the theme of the wondrous grace of God must be a high priority for a journal like *Mission*.

Because of this priority, I specifically commissioned the article in this issue on "The Other Presence" by Dr. W. Royce Clark of Pepperdine University. If God is just the "man upstairs" as the popular song of a few years back put it, then surely He is impotent to forgive us, to accept us, or to love us in any ultimate sense at all. But an awareness that God is "other" than man — omniscient, omnipotent, and omnipresent, as I learned as a child in Sunday school — means that when *He* accepts us, we are accepted and loved in an ultimate and final sense and stand in need of nothing more.

Because of this priority, we are printing in this issue the article by James Robinson on death. Death is the bottom line of human finitude, frailties, and imperfections. And it is death that finally drives us away from trust in ourselves and forces us to search for something "Other."

Because of this priority, we also are printing in this issue a very fine essay on the early years of our history by Dr. Nathan O. Hatch. Professor Hatch's essay fulfills this priority in two respects. First, in the very act of telling our story, he reminds us that we *do* have a history. We in the Restoration Movement have had a peculiar inclination to pretend that we have no history but the Bible, and that Lipscomb, Campbell, Stone, Luther, Calvin, and Aquinas simply have no bearing on who we are or what we believe. But all mortals have histories. Only God transcends the flow of time and the impact of human events.

Second, Hatch's essay reminds us that our movement was born in the spirit of grace. Our early fathers — Campbell, Stone, Smith, Jones, O'Kelley — recognized that God alone is God and that man is merely man. Therefore, they argued, no mere man has the right to take away another person's religious liberty. A person who accepts God's grace and then denies liberty to his brother reminds us of the man in Jesus' story whose master forgave his debt, but who in turn demanded payment from his own debtors, and when they could not pay, threw them into prison.

Also, because of this priority, this issue contains an article by Dr. Clarence Hibbs on second careers. If we have experienced the grace of Christ, then we are obligated to reach out to the neighbor in loving service. And it is this task to which Hibbs has dedicated his own life in his teaching and counseling ministry.

Finally, we are printing in this issue a sermon by Wayne Dockery, "Born in a Barn, or God, Why Couldn't You Give Him a Good Home?" Dockery reminds us that while God is infinite and "Other," he nevertheless relates Himself to us, regardless of how humble, poor, or despised we may be. "Whereas we tend to think of God," Dockery writes, "in terms of superlatives — strongest, all knowing, everywhere present — when God chose to reveal himself most fully, he chose diminutives — unimportant family, a barn around back, a corn crib, sheep herders, a baby — and finally the cross. God is found in the most unlikely places."

Finally, what can *Mission* readers expect in the coming months? The answer is, many good things.

There will be articles exploring Biblical texts and relating their pertinence to the world in which we live.

There will be articles on caring for human needs, on dealing with grief, depression, or the loss of a loved one.

There will be articles on ministry, on preaching, caring, and sharing the good news of our acceptance.

There will be articles exploring Christian ethics — our responsibility for the world in which we live and for the people who inhabit it.

There will be articles on missions and reports on creative and effective ways of communicating the Good News to others.

And finally, while avoiding preoccupation with ourselves, there nonetheless will be articles on us, who we are, and how we got that way. In this context, I already have asked a number of keen observers who are outside our movement, but who sustain a sympathetic interest in it, to write about us or about our theology from their own perspectives. Nathan Hatch's article in this issue is the first in this series. In addition, *Mission* readers can expect in the months ahead an article by the noted historian/sociologist of Southern religion, Professor Samuel S. Hill, Jr., on "The Churches of Christ and Religion in the South."

There also will be reports on themes of interest to *Mission* readers from leading interpreters of the American religious experience. Thus, *Mission* readers can expect an article from the well known Mennonite/evangelical theologian, Dr. John Howard Yoder, on "The Restoration Theme Among Anabaptists, Mennonites, and Amish." And there will be a report from Dr. Grant Wacker, one of the foremost interpreters of American Pentecostalism and a professor at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, on "The Meaning of American Pentecostalism."

In addition, *Mission* will reprint from time to time articles of special interest to *Mission* readers that are either out of print or otherwise inaccessible.

All in all, the future looks rich and promising, so promising in fact that *Mission* will be indispensable reading in the months ahead for those who want encouragement in their faith, information on their roots, and lively debate on issues that matter.

OF PARENTING AND SAVING AND HANDING ALONG THE JOURNAL

By RON DURHAM

Because I have been, in a way, parenting *Mission* for four and a half years, I let it go with something like a parent's pangs when a child leaves home. And because, as I shall disclose, my concern has even taken on Messianic dimensions, I am anxious that all the right things happen to it. Yet, children need to leave home, parents cannot really save their children, and magazines often need to be turned over to new leadership. And because I have confidence in the new editor, I am optimistic about the journal's future.

I look forward to *Mission's* role in the struggle for faith, and hope that it can do so in a more mature way, just like children mature in the skills of living. One problem I have felt in this area of journalistic child care is that *struggling* is out of sync with today's victory-oriented, happy-happy mood among evangelicals. Many such readers are irate when we raise questions about the easy assumptions of believers. But for me, trying to come to grips with the problems of faith is an essential part of parenting a Christian journal. Without struggle, we do not grow; and everyone wants their (brain) children to grow.

Many among us are also tired of struggling with our tradition; and I am more sympathetic at that point. It is one thing to face honestly the foibles of a religious heritage, and quite another never to turn the corner to a renewed affirmation of the tradition's strengths. I look forward to the journal's continued commitment to exposing pretensions among us, but without the acid ink which sometimes clings to my own pen. I suspect that many people believe us to be cut from the same cloth as Ira Rice Jr.'s *Contending for the Faith,* except that we are on the left. I think they are wrong, of course. And I am also impatient with the Positive Mental Attitude syndrome even among many "renewal" Churches of Christ, for it renders them unable to repent, and theologically impotent. Yet, I see the point: negativism is a frequently necessary place to visit, but *I* wouldn't want to live there, nor my child.

I said I would confess some intent to save somebody. Once, during a course in counseling, a group of counselors climbed into my own head. Their verdict: "Your problem is that you want to save the Church of Christ." Alas, 'twas true. And it was worse than a mere Messianic delusion; it was also schizophrenia. I wanted to save the conservatives from narrowness, so I championed a cause and a journal labeled "liberal" by most. Yet I now confess that I longed also to save the liberals. For many of them are both lost and out of date (a fate worse than being lost, for a liberal).

It used to be a pleasant and harmless pastime for liberals to poke fun at the fundamentalists, in the days when dorm matrons at our colleges warned girls not to wear patent leather shoes lest young men seek out immodest reflections. They laughed at such antics, secure in the belief (already out of date, even then) that the real underpinnings of the faith were firmly rooted in the culture around us, if not in the True Church. The Baptist vote alone would be enough to keep the culture Christian.

Now, of course, it is clearer that paganism and unbelief and greed and self-service and secularism are the real underpinnings of our society. But would you believe it? Many liberals haven't noticed! They still get their jollies from making sport of the fundies, not realizing that their children are likely to awaken in a world thoroughly foreign not only to funny, irresponsible, sub-culture conservative faith like the worst of our heritage, but to faith at all. I hope that the liberal (or merely unthinking) optimism of many of my friends is justified, and that the great fun it is to go with the flow instead of the Word turns out to be *Christian.* But I will

have greater hope if *Mission,* in its continued maturation, can accost all cultures, liberal or conservative, which do not take seriously the cross.

Several have asked about my plans. I look forward to continuing my part-time work in pastoral counseling here at the Central Church of Christ in Irving, Texas. I am also turning to other forms of Christian journalism, including a commentary series and, hopefully, some books and articles, since I still bleed ink when my finger is pricked.

For the support of all our readers, our board of trustees, and those loyal "Friends of Mission," I am truly grateful. I am also thankful to my critics, since thay have helped me grow. And for Richard Hughes and his editorship, may readers multiply, the presses not break down, postage rates decline, and the mailman get the sheet to the readers more quickly. For despite my counseling mentors, you still need saving, every one.

MISSION IN A PLAIN BROWN WRAPPER

By QUINTON DICKERSON
President, *Mission* Board of Trustees

Just over twelve years ago a group of persons met in Memphis to discuss plans to introduce yet another journal among the Churches of Christ. Retrospective analysis in another decade or two will determine if they and their successors achieved a measure of success in the effort to offer openness in Christian journalism.

A minister friend of mine recently told me of his interest in reading *Mission,* but stated that it would be unpopular for the journal to be seen arriving in his office. I replied perhaps we could arrange to have it delivered in a plain brown wrapper.

It is indeed paradoxical that a fellowship with strong traditional commitments to discovering and adhering to Biblical truths would in large measure ignore an attempt to "explore thoroughly the Scriptures and their meaning" if this effort involved rethinking old positions in light of current knowledge, researching areas previously uncharted, and asking forbidden questions.

Mission's pilgrimage involving honest, open and diligent questioning has not been without its mistakes in emphasis, judgment or conclusions. Because of our finite abilities and weaknesses, however, should we abandon our search for infinite truth, or should we search for truth in some setting devoid of open, honest questioning? In what kind of climate is truth more likely to surface? Do we dare not ask questions because (a) we have failed to answer them honestly in the past, or (b) these questions are difficult, unpleasant, or painful, or (c) the answers which emerge are uncomfortable?

What kind of forces have led to the development of a climate in which repetition of traditional positions is preferable to open inquiry? The secure believer should encourage open and fair minded discussion in which all areas are explored and no possible source of enlightenment is left unexamined. Only in this setting is truth most likely to be brought to light. If we are uncomfortable with the surroundings we view as we travel this journey, perhaps we should ask if our commitment is to the pursuit of truth or to the maintenance of tradition.

Mission welcomes her fourth in a series of distinguished editors in this issue and the Board reaffirms its commitment to the editorial policy statement of July, 1967, a portion of which is carried in this issue. We believe Richard Hughes will provide editorial leadership in a direction consistent with *Mission*'s task and with vigor and integrity for the 1980's. Seeking to understand our present theological position in a light of historical and Biblical perspectives, we would anticipate and work toward a future in which our fellowship is characterized by tolerance, honest study, and genuine love.

We certainly do not anticipate all answers being discovered, nor do we anticipate these goals as being popular ones. If, however, in the next decade there emerges only a climate where questions can be asked openly and answers sought honestly, we would have done our part to remove the plain brown wrapper from our *Mission.*

CONCEIVED IN LIBERTY, ROOTED IN FREEDOM

By NATHAN O. HATCH

Editor's note: Nathan O. Hatch is a scholar and an evangelical who teaches in the Department of History at Notre Dame University. He is particularly interested in American religion during and immediately after the American Revolution, and authored The Sacred Cause of Liberty: Republican Thought and the Millennium in Revolutionary New England *(Yale, 1977). His work in that field led him to look at the early years of the Restoration Movement, and its relation to the spirit of the Revolution.*

In the essay that follows, Hatch makes it clear that at the heart of the conception of our movement was a burning desire for religious liberty — a sentiment sometimes forgotten among our churches today.

The following is an exerpt from a longer essay, "The Christian Movement and the Demand for a Theology of the People," which will be published in full, with documentation, in a journal in the near future. Persons wanting to consult the longer article may address the editor of Mission *concerning the particulars of its publication.*

One cannot understand the Christians apart from their deep conviction that they had witnessed in the American and French Revolutions the most momentous historical events in two millennia.

This essay will focus on the cultural roots of the Christian or Disciples of Christ movement. Between 1790 and 1815, this loose network of religious radicals demanded, in light of the American and French Revolutions, root and branch reform in three areas.

First, they called for a revolution within the church that would place laity and clergy on an equal footing and would exalt the conscience of the individual over the collective will of any congregation or church organization. Secondly, they rejected the traditions of learned theology altogether and called for a new view of history that welcomed inquiry and innovation. Finally, they called for a populist hermeneutic premised on the inalienable right of every person to understand the New Testament for himself.

The Christians exploited to the hilt the potent themes of tyranny, slavery, and antichrist; and delighted in regaling their audiences with the latest chapter in the saga of the Beast and the Whore of Babylon. Simply put, Antichrist now worked his evil machinations through the clergy of all established denominations. Christians assailed the clergy as "tyrannical oppressors," "the mystery of iniquity," "friends of monarchy religion," "old Tories," "an aristocratical body of uniform nobility," and "hireling priests"; people who would submit to such tyrants they labeled priest-ridden, slavishly dependent, passively obedient.

But what end did the Christians have in view when decrying ecclesiastical authority? What positive implications did they wring out of the notion of religious liberty? Elias Smith came right to the point in an early issue of *The Herald of Gospel Liberty* when he contrasted the mere separation of church and state with "being wholly free to examine for ourselves, what is truth." He argued that every last Christian had the "unalienable right" to follow "the scripture wherever it leads him, even an equal right with the Bishops and Pastors of the churches . . . even though his principles may, in many things, be contrary to what the Reverend D. D.'s call Orthodoxy."

Using precisely the same language, Alexander Campbell pressed for "the inalienable right of all laymen to examine the sacred writings for themselves." Brimming with conspiratorial

notions of how clergymen of every stripe had "hoodwinked" the people, this logic eventually led each of these Christian leaders to demand that the traditional distinction between clergy and laity be abolished; and that any leadership in the local church function according to new ground rules: "liberty is no where safe in any hands excepting those of the people themselves."

The Christian idea of religious liberty revolutionized concepts of the church and stands in marked contrast to the eighteenth-century notion that religious liberty meant the civil right to choose or not to choose affiliation with a church. The converted man needed no guidance from theologically trained clergymen, no supervision by an ecclesiastical authority, and no creedal sureties of belief. Barton Stone set about destroying all church structures in order to get out from under the "outrageous abuses of the religious rights of free men."

In order to bring about real democracy in the church, the Christians took a root and branch approach to organization: not change nor purification, but abolition. In *The Last Will and Testament of the Springfield Presbytery,* Barton Stone and five colleagues dissolved their association, already a splinter group from the Presbyterian Church. Only by renouncing all institutional forms could "the oppressed . . . go free, and taste the sweets of gospel liberty."

Alexander Campbell did not even want to hear the words church government:

> We have no system of our own, or of others, to substitute in lieu of the reigning systems. We only aim at substituting the New Testament in lieu of every creed in existence, whether Mohammedan, Pagan, Jewish, or Presbyterian. We wish to call Christians to consider that Jesus Christ has made them kings and priests to God. We neither advocate Calvinism, Arminianism, Socianianism, Arianism, Trinitarianism, Unitarianism, Deism, nor Sectarianism, but *New Testamentism.*

In a similar vein, Barton Stone and his associates declared that the attempt "to impose any form of government upon the church . . . should be justly abandoned by every child of gospel liberty." They went on to say that any human form of government would be "like binding two or more dead bodies together" and coercing people "like parts of a machine." The organization of Protestant churches, which in colonial culture had been seen as vibrant and alive — the very body of Christ — now smacked of being dead and mechanistic.

In keeping with their attempt to abolish all church government, the Christians opposed all ecclesiastical names not found in the New Testament: clergy, reverend, doctor, association, council, synod, presbytery, session, creed, catechism, or seminary. They denounced the practice of Calvinistic Baptists and Presbyterians that a member could not withdraw from a church unless dismissed.

The Christians also refused to adhere to creeds as tests of fellowship, to undergo theological examinations, or to offer a confession of faith upon joining a church. Taking equal rights seriously, these reformers saw no figure of speech intended when they read Matthew 23:8, their most common motto: "Style no man on earth your father, for he alone is your Father who is in Heaven, and all ye are brethren."

The Christians spent considerable time talking about the "all-sufficiency of Bible Government," submitting to King Jesus, and patterning themselves after the model of the primitive church, which, to no ones's surprise, they found "came down from heaven and was a republic." But by removing the issue of power and authority from any institutional arrangement in time and space, they were asserting adherence to the creed that no human organization could exist that did not spring from the uncoerced consent of the individual.

James O'Kelley, magnificently demonstrates this view of authority as he tries to wriggle out of Francis Asbury's assertion that O'Kelley had disobeyed the New Testament command, "Obey them that have rule over you." "Observe Sir,"

he writes to Asbury,

> the Roman Clergy claim obedience from this text. The Protestant Clergy claim obedience from this text. Bishop Asbury, the Dissenter claims obedience from this text. The Protestants refuse to obey the Roman clergy. The Methodist Clergy refuse to obey the Protestant Bishops. And we refuse to obey Bishop Asbury. Who is guilty? But who is judge? When a person claims obedience from me, I demand his authority, whether it be from God, or civil government. If it be from God, he must be a Prophet or Apostle . . . . Rule over, is no more than for the church to follow those guides who delivered unto them the Word of God.

In sum, O'Kelley was arguing that by submitting to the New Testament — the Constitution of the Christian Church — a Christian in 1800 never would have to doff his hat to any mere mortal.

The Christians were venting their hostility not merely against Calvinism, as if they might find their niche as Methodists or Free-will Baptists, but against the *system* of Calvinism. They were more concerned to *forget* Calvinism than to *attack* it, for to their way of thinking formulating a systematic attack would be sweeping the house clean of one demon to have it filled with another. "We are not personally acquainted with the writings of John Calvin," wrote Robert Marshall and John Thompson, two colleagues of Barton Stone, "nor are we certain how nearly we agree with his views of divine truth; neither do we care."

This was no mere revolt against Calvinism but against theology itself. What was going on that gave Barton Stone the audacity not only to reject the doctrine of the Trinity — Unitarians right and left were doing that — but also to maintain: "I have not spent, perhaps, an hour in ten years in thinking about the Trinity?" Or what made it credible for Elias Smith after seriously debating whether he would be a Calvinist or a Universalist, to remove the dilemma altogether by dropping them both? "I was now without a system," he confessed with obvious relief, "and felt ready to search the scriptures." How could these men convince themselves, not to mention their followers, that the stage was set for a church without organization and a theology without theory?

Whatever else the Christians demanded, the rallying cry of their theological revolution was a new view of history. They called for a new dispensation of "gospel liberty," radically discontinuous with the past. They advocated new theological ground rules that relegated everything since the New Testament to "the rubbish of ages."

One cannot understand the Christians apart from their deep conviction that they had witnessed in the American and French Revolutions the most momentous historical events in two millennia — a *novus ordo saeclorum*. The opening line of *The Herald of Gospel Liberty* read: "The age in which we live may certainly be distinquished from others in the history of Man," and Elias Smith was quick to point out that it was the struggle for liberty and the right of mankind that set it apart.

This was a theology unabashedly American and premised on the application of egalitarian norms to politics and religion. In describing the true gospel that would revolutionize the world, Alexander Campbell called it "the declaration of independence of the Kingdom of Jesus."

According to Smith, the foundations of Christ's millennial kingdom were laid in the American and French Revolutions. "The time will come," he said, "when there will not be a *crowned head* on earth. Every attempt which is made to keep up a Kingly government, and to pull down a Republican one, will . . . serve to destroy monarchy . . . . Every small piece, or plan, of Monarchy which is a part of the *image* [of Antichrist] will be wholly dissolved, when *the people* are resolved to 'live free or die.'"

The following year in Washington, Pennsylvania, Alexander Campbell's father, Thomas, published the first salvo of their movement, *The Declaration and Address of the Christian Association of Washington,* and pointed to the same state of revolutionary and apocalyptic affairs:

> Do ye not discern the signs of the times? Have not the two witnesses arisen from their state of political death, from under the long proscription of ages? . . . Who against us has not heard the report of these things — of these lightnings and thunderings, and voices, of this tremendous earthquake and great hail; of these awful convulsions and revolutions that have dashed and are dashing to pieces the nations, like a potter's vessel?

In their view, such political convulsions spoke as the voice of providence "loudly and expressly calling us to repentance and reformation . . . Resume that precious, that dear bought liberty, wherewith Christ has made his people free; a liberty from subjection to any authority but his own, in matters of religion. Call no man father . . . ." Campbell argued that the War for Independence unveiled a new epoch that would deliver men from "the melancholy thraldom of relentless systems." America's "political regeneration" gave her the responsibility to lead a comparable "ecclesiastical renovation."

An expectancy and overt respect for novelty characterized the Christians, as two associates of Barton Stone confessed: "We confidently thought that the Millennium was just at hand, and that a glorious church would soon be formed; we thought, also, that we had found the very plan for its formation and growth." Opponents of these men agreed, moreover, that a sense of apocalyptic urgency had fueled the movement from the start.

This was a theology unabashedly American and premised on the application of egalitarian norms to politics and religion. In describing the true gospel that would revolutionize the world, Alexander Campbell called it "the declaration of independence of the Kingdom of Jesus." Elias Smith and Barton Stone chose the same term to describe their withdrawal from the Baptists and Presbyterians, respectively. Similarly, James O'Kelley claimed that he broke with the Methodists because they left him no option but "unlimited submission" or separation.

The lengths to which they allowed political idioms to color their thinking is sometimes difficult to comprehend: such as references to the early church as a republican society with a New Testament constitution. In 1807, however, one maverick Christian in Marietta, Ohio, outdid them all, claiming that "the great potentate of the world, in principle, is the most *genuine* REPUBLICAN that ever existed."

To our way of thinking, it is odd that men so committed to the separation of church and state held up a given political structure as a model for the church. They endowed the republic with the same divine authority as did the Congregationalists, but for opposite reasons. The republic became a new city on a hill not because it kept faith with Puritan tradition, as the Standing Order reasoned, but because it sounded the death knell for corporate and heirarchic conceptions of the social order.

To our way of thinking, it is odd that men so committed to the separation of church and state held up a given political structure as a model for the church.

For these radical sectarians, the constitutional guarantees of separation of church and state laid the groundwork for a new age. In sum, a government so enlightened as to tell the churches to go their own way must have also had prophetic power to tell them which way to go.

There is also ample evidence that these men took seriously the prophetic words that, at the end of time, the kingdoms of this world would in

a literal sense become the kingdom of Christ. Elias Smith was so enraptured by Jefferson's second election victory that he delivered a lengthy sermon to show "that the government of this country is the kingly government of Chrits." The Presidency of Jefferson symbolized the abolition of the old order and, for the first time since the days of the Apostles, God's rule on earth was manifest — a model that was to revolutionize state and church.

The Christians would have gladly pleaded guilty to the charge that they conspired to overturn the very foundations of religious authority. Yet amidst their unraveling of cultural norms, they did seek to leave one thread of the fabric intact. They clung tenaciously to one final, unassailable authority, the *ipse dixit* of the New Testament. The direct propositions of Scripture became the only ground of certainty. In a letter to the *Herald of Gospel Liberty* in 1809, James O'Kelley spelled out this central plank of the Christian platform:

> In consequence of your receiving Christ as only head, and ruler of his church, it necessarily follows, that his law as contained in the *New Testament,* should be received without any addition, abridgment, alternations, or embellishments, to the exclusion of all articles of religion, confessions of faith, creeds, &c. &c. &c. composed by men.

"The New Testament has been as the law once was, *among the rubbish,"* proclaimed Elias Smith. "Now we have found it, let us read it to the people from morning till evening." These were fighting words, no doubt, to the genteel clergy, men accustomed to covenants being the lynch pin of society and to thinking of America as the new Israel.

But even more radical than dismissing the Old Testament as a priestly rag used to hoodwink the people was the approach that Christians used to interpret Scripture. "I have endeavored to read the Scriptures as though no one had read them before me," claimed Alexander Campbell, "and I am as much on my guard against reading them today, through the medium of my own views yesterday, or a week ago, as I am against being influenced by any foreign name, authority or system whatever."

Protestants had always argued for *sola scriptura* but this kind of radical individualism set the Bible against the entire history of biblical interpretation. In this hermeneutic, no human authority, contemporary or historical, had the right to advise the individual in his spiritual quest. In a shrewd move to ward off any systematic theology, these men insisted that religious discussion be limited to "Bible language," in the words of Elias Smith, "to prove every particular from plain declarations recorded in the Bible."

This fresh hermeneutic had considerable appeal because it spoke to pressing issues. First, it proclaimed a new ground of certainty for a generation perplexed that it could no longer hear the voice of God above a din of sectarian confusion. If people would only abandon the husks of theological abstraction, the truth would be plain for all to see.

A second appeal of this approach to Scripture was that it dared the common man to open the Bible and think for himself. All theological abstractions were abandoned — concepts such as the trinity, foreordination, and original sin — and all that needed be done to establish a given point was to string together texts from the King James Bible. Any Christian using New Testament words could fend off the most brilliant theological argument by the simple retort that he was using God's word against human opinion. All the weight of church history could not begin to tip the scale against the Christian's simple declaration, say, that the New Testament did not contain the word Trinity.

This democratic revolution in theology wrenched the queen of the sciences from the learned speculations of Harvard, Yale, and Princeton men and encouraged the blacksmith, cooper, and tiller of the soil not only to experience salvation but also to explain the process. Its genius was to allow common people to feel, for a fleeting moment at least, that they were beholden to no one and were masters of their own fate.

THE OTHER PRESENCE

By W. ROYCE CLARK

We can allow the most otherwise embarrassing and dislodging questions to be asked about anything, and stand with the reassurance that even with the dissolution of everything finite, the Other remains.

Religious man has usually conceived of his life and world as being positively related to a god or gods. The Divine cared for him, in most religions even created him, and in a very real way man felt that he participated in the Divine life. God could be counted on, His actions even predicted to a significant extent.

Yet in the midst of this divine-human relation, all religions have also demanded that there is something Other that is greater than humanity and the cosmos combined.

The Spirit which creates from the dust of the earth and sustains every creature in existence (Psalm 104) is never encompassed, circumscribed, fully defined or completely known. The Ineffable remains mysterious, beyond human manipulation, beyond any identification with the phenomena of our cosmos.

Thus it is that God instructs Israel to refrain from any attempt to identify Him or represent Him. Just by knowing the divine name, the temptation of humans to displace and/or manipulate deity becomes very real.

Is it any wonder that most religions have had their philosophers eventually who, when they pushed this accepted picture of deity to its logical conclusions, insisted that God could not be correctly spoken of except through negative attributes. This can be found, for example, in Hindu thought as Nirguna Brahman, or in the Judaic theology of Moses Maimonides, or in the ontological "proof" of the existence of God by St. Anselm in the Christian tradition.

There have been explanations in Christian history that propose that this otherness of God is nothing more than an unconscious projection of qualities that belong to the human species itself. While it is probably true that both the similarities and the differences between humanity and divinity may often be only the imaginings of man, unworthy of God or man; nevertheless, neither the similarities nor differences can be explained so easily.

To be sure, all of the good attributes of sinful and finite man, totaled together, do not add up to the infinite perfection of God. And when the Jewish-Christian God suspends even the highest human ethics, as in His demand for Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, it is clear that God not only stands over against the limitations of man, but He stands over against man's highest aspirations and ideals, as well. This God is truly Other!

I. How Do We Know the Other?

But how do we come to know this Other-ness? On the one hand, if God really is Other, then no amount of manipulation or coercion on our part could possibly force God to confront

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us. This is what Paul Tillich meant several years ago when, after suggesting that the Spirit was the answer to life's ambiguities, he admitted that he could not provide anyone with the method of securing the Spirit for themselves. Certainly not, if God is Other than man!

Despite the efforts of religious people throughout history — the recitation of the divine name over and over, the frenzied dancing, charismatic prayers and tongues, the offering of animals on altars, sexual orgies with divine manipulative power, or even the offering of divinity on a cross — despite all this, man is never able to manipulate God.

Rather, the initiative belongs to the Other. In its own good time, it acts and reveals itself. This *may* occur in those kinds of activities mentioned above, or in others more subdued, or in events that are not considered "religious" in the least — in one's sitting by the ocean, gazing contemplatively at its depth; touching the body of a deceased loved one; listening to Brahms; watching a child being born; making love to one's husband or wife; or in a practically infinite number of other ways.

The point is that God as Other is not locked into finite formulas and predictable, understandable ways. It is this aspect of God that we celebrate when we sing the hymn, "God moves in a mysterious way, His wonders to perform." When we sing these words, we confess that God is not comprehended by logic or ideas, and that His infinite greatness eludes the rational prowess of finite man.

The point is that God as Other is not locked into finite formulas and predictable, understandable ways.

When the Other touches a human being, that person transcends himself, becoming aware of the negation of his finitude. Time and space are temporarily removed, and all the normal ways of judging experiences such as quantity, quality, substance or relation, fade into oblivion. It is a moment of ecstasy, of being removed from one's normal frame of mind.

It is clear that God not only stands over against the limitations of man, but He stands over against man's highest aspirations and ideals, as well. This God is truly Other!

I speak of ecstacy to emphasize that the Other Presence is not merely that invisible, spiritual companion that stands by one's side in one's everyday mundane activities. Rather, I am suggesting ecstacy as a removal from the ordinary, as a state of mind in which one is overwhelmed, as was Isaiah, by one's inability to confront or comprehend the Other Presence, or even to avoid falling to pieces when the Other is there.

Thus it is that the Other Presence can only be discovered as Presence, never as an abstract idea or concept. This is a vital understanding that Christianity has tried to propogate from its very beginnings, and a view of God shared by most other religions.

An awareness of the "Whence" of our being can never be guaranteed by contemplation; but without contemplation it likely will never be experienced. We need periodically to silence our finite concerns. As the Psalmist has said, "Be still and know that I am God." (Ps. 46:10.) Obviously, he who is completely obsessed with the finite concerns of life will be so preoccupied as never to hear the Other which is Infinite.

II. Religious and Ethical Implications of God as Other

Finally, what are the religious and ethical implications of knowing and speaking of God as Other? If all we are attempting is to form a religious elite, an esoteric fellowship, by insisting to people that God is Other than what they are or than what they think God is — then we miss the whole point. We are then like the enemies of

Paul in Galatians who, he claimed, were shutting people out so that they would have to beg to be included. In no way do we control the fellowship of even the definitions of God! But the positive benefits of thinking of the Other side of God are obvious.

First, to think of God in terms of Other would likely have tremendous impact upon our worship. Nobody enthusiastically worships that which is only a few shades or degrees different or superior. The irony of Protestant history is that with our smashing of the icons, we have simultaneously almost eliminated the Other side of God.

To re-think God in terms of Other would be to reverse our present trend of greater and greater banality in worship. Combined with our insights that God does not dwell in temples made by men's hands and machines would also be the understanding that the Other is not honored by architecturally drab, sterile, cheap structures. Combined with the protest against clergy-laity distinctions and a specialized priesthood who corner the religious market would be the additional insight that theological ignorance, unpredictable spontaneity, and T-shirts and blue jeans on those administering communion do not enhance our image of the Other in whose presence we are supposed to stand in awe.

Our Protestant, materialistic, technological society has convinced many, on both a rational and emotional level, that there is really nothing sacred. So is it any wonder that in our worship, we often take pains to do nothing special for God — since God is nothing special! It is extremely difficult to worship a concept, so if there is no Other Presence involved, it is very doubtful that worship even occurs.

I realize that the great Immanuel Kant thought that all worship was simply "pseudo-service" to God, that the only legitimate function of religion was to evoke moral responses from man. That kind of thinking, in a less sophisticated way, is quite pervasive and appealing in our world in which we pride ourselves with having moved beyond superstition and credulity.

But what Kant miscalculated was the moral ineffectiveness of a religious symbol once people admit, as he wanted them to, that the symbol may have no counterpart in reality but is simply a postulate necessary to practical reason. When I acknowledge that there may or may not be a reality corresponding to whatever religious symbol I am using (God, heaven, freedom, etc.), then the transcendent character of the symbol is thrown into doubt. With the loss of a feeling of its transcendence, I naturally do not worship the source from which it comes, but more than this, I must now be motivated entirely from reason, trusting solely in myself.

The object of our devotion and ultimate allegiance is the Other — no man on earth, no institution, no creed, no future utopia, no historical event, and no book.

That man should be rational I do not contest. But I do question the notion that man's value system can be effective when his values are viewed as created by and deriving from himself. Somehow, no matter how rational man is, he must feel that there is in some way an Other at work in his life and values, and this Other evokes worship just as it evokes a moral response.

Yes, I am suggesting what appears to be anachronistic, perhaps ridiculous. I am contending that we likely need trepidation in our prayers; we need to erect tall, magnificent cathedrals reaching into the heavens; we need to unleash the human spirit in great works of religious art; we need to intone the Other in very special palces and times with special, unique, dignified language; we need to be inspired by a music that helps the soul transcend. Our total familiarity with the Other and our identification of the Other with the common, has bred in us contempt for the Other. Only when we begin to re-emphasize the Other-ness of God will our worship take on the most meaningful dimensions possible.

I do not know whether Western man can revive in himself the mentality that would contribute huge sums of money and time to the erection of beautiful places of worship or to the creation of great religious art. Certainly the world's poverty and problems are not to be neglected by a re-focus on the Other-ness of God and its worship implications. But it may well be questionable whether the totally rational, autonomous secular human is really as conscientious toward his fellowman's needs as was his religious counterpart or predecessor. I believe that religion and ethics are inextricably tied together in the Other.

Finally, the second major benefit of knowing God as Other is that we can be critical of everything finite. The object of our devotion and ultimate allegiance is the Other — no man on earth, no institution, no creed, no future utopia, no historical event, and no book. This is the good side of the Protestant spirit which Tillich perceived several decades ago.

If God is really Other, we hopefully will never make the mistake of identifying that Other with any finite reality. By this approach to life, we can avoid idolatrous nationalism, an experience most countries sooner or later endure to their shame. We can prevent the embarrassing and sickly religious exclusivism that characterizes religious sects who claim to be alone in knowing and following all truth. We can work in politics and social programs but also have an orientation that prevents our being swallowed up by the political and corporate structures through which we work.

We can withstand all the traumatic surprises of life, knowing that our God is freer than our static notions of natural law, justice, and reality. We can allow the most otherwise embarrassing and dislodging questions to be asked about anything, and stand with the reassurance that even with the dissolution of everything finite, the Other remains.

We can still have our sacred times and spaces — we *must* still have them — but sacred does not mean divine. There is only an Other, but many are the ways in which we have felt its presence in a special sense, and we continue to re-present these moments or experiences with the hopes of greater and greater awareness of the Other. They are not simply, as Barth once referred to them, "banks of the canal" through which the Spirit once flowed but now no longer does; they are the moments of transcendence of the human spirit through which the Spirit may flow again by God's initiative if God is really Other.

"ALL IS VANITY": SOLOMON "IT LOOKS LIKE HE MAY BE RIGHT": ROBINSON

By G. JAMES ROBINSON

Death is getting on my nerves as I approach one of my early mid-life passages. Ten years ago I could spit in its eye. I could talk about death, teach it, preach it, make fun of it and yes, God forbid, laugh at it. I was 22. Nobody in his right mind ought to be 22. I now tremble at the thought of death, which enters into my train of consciousness only a few dozen times each day. Like when I feel a gas pain (heart attack I figure), have a sore back (leukemia for sure), blurred vision (tumor), or shortness of breath (cancer).

I'm a faithless coward. And you're not?

Talk on preacher. Tell us how the victory's won, and how he is better off now, and how we shouldn't cry and how the Lord called him home....and, and all I can hear is "MY GOD!! Why? Why have you left me now?" And it scares the beejeebies out of me.

Death is getting on my nerves. I don't like it. I don't pretend to. I'm afraid of it, I think about it, I'm getting paranoid. I have hopes of living at

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least another year but doubt that I'll see another playoff game. I pretend not to notice but I tremble at night in still darkness when I am supposed to be asleep. I hear my wife breathing and my two-year-old son turning contentedly in his bed. Am I the only one on earth who is awake and scared?

Everything is vain. I find it hard to believe but it is. It is all a very unfunny joke. What good does it do to get born? And go through high school and learn to drive, take your immunization shots, learn how to diagram sentences, enroll in college, go through all the turmoil of starting a career and getting married and raising children and buying insurance and going to one zillion church services and then... boom! Everybody just dies off.

Another group comes on the scene, a new generation and they have their turn and do the very same thing, fully believing they discovered it for the first time. That generation thinks it was the most important, the worst, or the sinfulest or the best or the lostest or the happiest, ad infinitum. Stupid. Only the earth remains. The sun, the wind, the rivers do their bit, big deal. What difference does it make? None.

Churchill, dead! Kennedy, dead! Will Rogers, dead! C. S. Lewis, dead! Babe Ruth, dead! Hemmingway, Chekhov, Tolstoy, Twain, Joyce, Anderson, all dead! Thurmon Munson, dead! Tony Lema, dead! Bobby Jones, dead! J. V. Cain, right before my eyes falls over backwards and is dead before he hits the ground. I'm standing there and I see it and it doesn't do me a whole lot of good. Wilma Hill Robinson, dead! Grady James Robinson, Sr., dead! Where will it end?

I read on the bathroom walls at the library, "Death is nature's way of telling you to slow down." Very funny,veee-ry funny. Probably written by a 22-year-old preacher with white shoes and matching belt and tie in a leisure suit.

Only a fool can pretend that he does not fear and tremble in the face of death. Or maybe someone who has yet to be touched by it. I read in Saroyan's stuff about his long preoccupation with death and I understand. I read in Ecclesiastes, a book that is making more sense all the time, about death and how we're all going to turn to dust. I read others who fear it, respect it, fight it, contend it, and I say amen.

I find that it is the very young, your teen group, who laughs at death, the middle-agers like me who fear it the most, and then the wise and ancient who say, "Ah, what the heck, I've had my share."

Marilyn Monroe, dead! Gable, dead! John Wayne, dead! Elvis, dead! Kit Carson, dead! Davy Crockett, dead! Solomon, dead! Einstein, dead! Washington, dead! Rockwell, dead! Dizzy Dean, dead! Miss Ann (English Lit '62), dead! Jasper Bly, (left tackle '62-'63, G.H.S.), dead!

"For there is no remembrance of the wise more than of the fool forever; seeing that which now is in the days to come shall all be forgotten. And how dieth the wise man? As the fool. Therefore, I hated life." Ecclesiastes, chapter three.

Modern Translation: "It is a strange thing that God hath wrought upon a man to endure. 'Tis all vexation and vanity....(then you got your bad news). 'Tis a burden to be born, 'tis an unknown-God-forsaken-dead-end-street to die, 'tis some kind of pure hell in between." G.J.R.

If nothing makes sense and all is vanity and vexation and void, there is no wisdom under the sun and so will be appropo to conclude with a rush of pure folly, or is it pure wisdom.

"To be, is to do!" Nietzche.
"To do, is to be." Sartre.
"Do be, do be do." Sinatra.

Is there not one who can answer? Don't we have one single person among this entire race who can go for us? Is there not one somewhere, sometime, somehow who has borne our kind of miserable sorrow? One, who is fully acquainted with my kind of gut wrenching, insomnia causing, nauseating enraged grief? Is there not one who has broken the vain cycle of nothingness called life?

"Come unto me all you that struggle and are deeply troubled, I'll give you rest." — Jesus.

CHOOSING AGAIN

By CLARENCE HIBBS

The Christian contemplating a career change has a golden opportunity to turn his or her attention to the weightier matters.

"Now what is he really asking me?," I thought to myself as he sat in my office during his first visit. He was an officer in the military, considering retirement after twenty years' service. But he was still young, in his mid-thirties, with plenty of time to pursue a new career.

He came to me for what is sometimes called "career counseling." This type of client is frequently given vocational interest inventories, assigned readings in vocational literature, and then matched with occupations appropriate to his interests and abilities. But I had come to distrust this approach to career decision-making.

Experience had suggested to me that often more important questions had to be considered before settling on a specific occupation.

Something about this young captain's manner suggested that the crisis he was facing was greater than it appeared. The tentative decision to leave the military brought out deep seated fears: "What do I have to offer?" "Is there a place out there for someone like me?"

This young captain was not unusual. Decisions for career changes seem to be occurring wth increasing frequency. Not many years ago, the norm was to enter an occupation and stay with it until retirement. Changing careers frequently was considered a sign of instability. This evaluation is less common today. A person with experience in one field may be of considerable value in another.

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It may be that in the future the person who chooses a career and stays with it until retirement will be the exception rather than the rule. However, because of our basic nature, it is unlikely that career changes will ever be made without a good bit of distress.

Both initial career decisions and later mid-career changes should be accompanied by careful consideration of one's values as well as abilities and interests.

I am reminded of a statement by Tom Green[1] who, in contemplating a future society in which only ten percent of a person's time will be needed to make a living, suggests that a distinction should be made between a "job" and "work." A job, he says, is what we do for a living. It may take a year, or even forty years. But a work is a task, a mission which can be accomplished only in a lifetime. Anything which can be accomplished in less than a lifetime is a job. But a task which will occupy a whole life is a work. It could be that the content of one's "work" would have little to do with the specifics of one's "job."

This conception of a "work" seems to have important implications for the Christian. If "work" is considered to be a life finding its purpose in doing the will of God, then the particular "job" has less value than most of us place on it. For some of us, men especially, our worth as a person and our sense of identity is dependent upon our "job," and is measured by the way we and others perceive our profession. Success is measured by how high one rises in the corporate structure, how much money we make, or some other external measure of accomplishment.

The Christian contemplating a career change has a golden opportunity to turn his or her attention to the weightier matters — the contribution that can be made to the life of the

church, the enrichment of family life, and involvement in the betterment of the community — as a part of the decision-making process.

I have a friend who turned down repeated offers from his company to move because he felt that it was more important to raise his children in a stable environment and to work with the small congregation where he lived than to advance in status and salary. Another made what was a painful move for the family so that they could be in a place of greater service to the church. Both made their decisions after a great deal of serious thought and much prayer.

For the Christian to take a careful inventory of his or her beliefs and convictions is the first step in making a truly mature career decision. Many of us come to realize after years of employment that we never adequately worked through this process of sorting out our priorities. But the mature person is in an excellent position to do so. By this time, we are able to ask ourselves what life demands of us rather than what we demand of life.[2]

This approach to career decision-making aims the process in a spiritual direction. All decisions revolve around how life is lived with God at the center. This approach frees us from the domination of lesser values. Questions of salary, position or prestige seem less important. What is worth doing has a new focus — or an old focus newly rediscovered. Gaining a proper perspective on life is a constant process rather than a once-for-all achievement.

I remember that as the captain searched for answers to his crisis a most unexpected thing happened. When I first met him he was depressed and anxious about the future. Life was a dreary prospect with few bright spots.

But as he became aware that spiritual values were primary for him, excitement replaced depression. He had talents awaiting expression. His previous experiences were valuable for the future, not dead relics of the past. Involvement in the church seemed to hold more promise for fulfillment than an occupation catering to his ego needs.

He originally came asking help in making a *job* choice. He turned his attention instead to making the choice of a *life's work,* and the prospect turned his despair into elation. The last time I saw him he was very optimistic about the future. He felt he had found purpose for his life which transcended the circumstances of his work. Yes, he had decided on a specific kind of occupation, but he seemed hardly willing to talk about that. He now spoke of how comfortable he felt with himself and with his place in the world.

For someone pondering a change in work direction, this process of self-evaluation might sound appealing, but how does one go about it. First, I recommend the services of a good counselor who has some knowledge of the psychology of vocations and vocational choice. There are many books being published currently about changing jobs. Richard Bolles has written two books that have proven helpful to many. One is a fascinating manual for the job hunter called *What Color Is Your Parachute?* (Berkely, Ca.: Ten Speed Press, 1978). Bolles has expanded these ideas in a heavier volume called *The Three Boxes of Life and How to Get Out of Them* (Berkeley, Ca.: Ten Speed Press, 1978). John Bradley's *Christian Career Planning* (Portland: Multnomah Press, 1977) utilizes some of the same principles incorporating the Christian value system. Thinking one's way through a change in occupation will be aided by any of these books.

Though frequently accompanied by doubts and fears, changing careers is a growing trend. It would be most encouraging if Christians contemplating such changes would follow the example of my military friend who asked himself who he was and what he had to offer life, and then searched for ways to implement his values. In doing so he moved toward a fuller life for himself and those whose lives he touched.

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[1]Thomas R. Green, *Work, Leisure, and the American Schools* (New York: Random House, 1968), pp. 70-92.

[2]Robert C. Leslie, *Jesus and Logtherapy* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1965), pp. 75-79.

BORN IN A BARN, OR GOD, WHY COULDN'T YOU GIVE HIM A GOOD HOME?

By WAYNE DOCKERY

Text: Luke 2:1-20

The Nativity is a recurring motif, it seems, in the art of every age. Most paintings share common elements: a warm color scheme, well dressed magi, shepherds, and onlookers, confident, beaming parents, and a child with resplendent countenance. Everyone is focused on the child.

But one painting is different. Done by a French painter, Lerolle, in the nineteenth century, this painting is unadorned, almost stark. I can best describe the work this way.

Imagine your favorite Nativity scene. Now, remove from it the star. Take away the halos. Take away the well dressed wise men. Take away the confident, beaming mother. And in her place, put Mary, a very young, very frightened, very cold girl, exhausted after her first labor and childbirth. She leans heavily on Joseph; he is haggard from lack of sleep. It's late. The two are sitting half reclined, alone in the far corner of a large ramshackled shed. The rough hewn beams standing to support the roof dominate the scene, about a dozen of them. And in the foreground, half hiding behind one of the beams are three very tattered shepherds. Excited, but as much afraid as excited, they are about to begin their tale.

I believe that this painting, more than any other I have seen, captures the spirit of Luke's narrative. Luke does not tell us of the wise men; he does not tell us of the star. And, only Luke chooses to tell us how Joseph and Mary are pushed about by the government; only he lets us know they were at the whim of a compassionless innkeeper. Only he lets us know about the corn crib.

Jesus is born to a poor, young Jewish couple in a barn; that is Luke's message. The only ones let in on God's secret are a bunch of sheep herders, wandering people, likely to confuse someone else's property with their own. None of the characters in Luke's account have any clout.

Luke's telling of the birth of Jesus, like the painting, is stark. Reading Luke makes us want to ask, "God, why couldn't you give him a good home?" A Christmas story told without tinsel bothers us, doesn't it? But that's the way Luke told it just the same. What can we hear in this bleak but somehow appealing tale?

Here in Luke's few paragraphs is encapsuled the most profound revelation of God we have. Whereas we tend to think of God in terms of superlatives—strongest, all knowing, everywhere present—when God chose to reveal himself most fully, he chose diminutives—unimportant family, a barn around back, a corn crib, sheep herders, a baby—and finally the cross. God is found in the most unlikely places.

Luke sets this story in a flurry of Messianic expectation. Everyone we confront in the beginning of this gospel is waiting excitedly for the Christ of God. The priest Zacharius and his wife Elizabeth, Simeon and Anna the prophetess—they all were waiting for him. The Christ, of course, was to be a magnificent king like David, one who, in contrast to the Roman government, would be fair to everybody and would bring peace, who would save the poor beleaguered Jewish people from all their oppressors.

Funny thing, in many of the passages which spoke of this powerful, magnificent monarch, it was said that his coming would be signaled by preaching among the poor. The announcement of the arrival of this kind, it was said, would be heard among the ranks of those least likely to hear, the disenfranchised masses. The heralds would run before Christ and make his arrival known not in the courts and chambers of nobility but in hovels.

Luke, with his stark picture of the arrival of this king, emphasizes just that aspect of Jesus'

birth. Jesus is good news to the poor. They are the ones to whom Jesus is announced. They are the ones who pronounce a blessing on Jesus. Jesus is good news for the poor.

But we are not poor, most of us. When a "no vacancy" sign frustrates us, we drive to the next town and pay what it takes. When we sleep outdoors as the shepherds did, it's in the best tent Sears has; Ted Williams himself would sleep in it. We are not poor; where does that leave us? Are we left in the cold like the babe? Is there room for us?

Some might say, "No, God is not with us," and mumble something about the eye of a needle. But that is not what Luke says. He is talking about more than economics when he portrays Jesus as coming to the poor. He means that Jesus is good news for *all*, rich or poor, who are left out in the cold.

When Luke continues his story, a woman, a prostitute, comes to Jesus bringing expensive ointment. The disciples turn the cold shoulder to this woman made rich with seamy evenings. She is used to the cold. But Jesus comes to her, places his arm around her, forgives her. Again, Jesus makes a hero of a rich Samaritan who shows compassion. Jesus accepts this man excluded from full participation in society by racial lines. He too is used to the cold. Both of these heroes of Luke's gospel were rich in one sense—they had money—but both were left out in the cold.

It was only the compassionless rich that bothered Jesus, the one who let Lazarus starve on his doorstep. Most of us who have money—who are rich in that sense—are poor nonetheless. For we are lonely, unsure of ourselves, hurt from the grief of losses, the grief of being shut out by others. We have been left out in the cold—some in one way, some in another. It is just this hollowness that crosses the boundaries of rich and poor that the God-born-in-a-barn, laid in a corn crib, came to fill.

Why didn't God give Jesus a good home? He had the pick of any home in Israel. To our way of thinking, he made a poor choice; Mary and Joseph would not have been high on our list of adoptive parents.

But from Luke's stark tale we learn at least two things. Number one: whereas we tend to think that God has abandoned us when we experience hardship, God surprises us. He is found in the most unlikely places. If you are alone this Christmas, be reminded by this baby that you have not been abandoned by God. If you are elderly, if you are ill, if you are grieving, remember he is not one who flees from hurting people. He has been there. He cares especially for you who are in the cold.

And a second thing we learn from Luke's story is this: we have been called to the side of the Jesus who was born in a barn in order to fulfill his ministry. We are called to remember, as God did, those who are left out in the cold. And they may not be far from our door.

Our frenzied pace has left many in our own families excluded. Now is the time to hug those children whom we scarcely have seen this year, to tell them what they mean to us, to sit down with them to play for one uninterrupted hour, and to vow we will not leave them cold again. For our spouses and special friends, a genuine expression of appreciation may have been all too rare. Gifts are fine, but aren't you glad that instead of a bundle of toys, God came to present himself to us? Presence, to be present and fully attentive to each other, will do much more to warm a cold existence than presents.

And some stuck in a barnyard out back are further from our doorstep than our own families. May we remember and be with those stuck in unlikely places out back: our aged, our starving, our abused, in short all those like the prostitute and Samaritan, who have been abandoned by mankind. Like God, may the church come as a babe to the unlikely corners of our city to warm cold bodies and hearts with our presence.

When we give gifts at this season of the year, do we sometimes say, "Go around back, I think you can find some space in the hay; go look under the tinselled tree, or in the fruit basket; I have something nice for you *there*." How different it would be to say instead, "Let me *come* and *be with* you because I love you."

When next you notice a Nativity scene with the plain, stringy straw in the corn crib where the Christ child lay, you may ask yourself, "God, why didn't you give him a good home?" But remember that he came to warm the lives of a poor couple and some herdsmen who were out in the cold, and in that, he came to bring life to us all.

This sermon was delivered to the Glenwood Church of Christ, Tyler, Texas, where Wayne Dockery regularly preaches, December 24, 1978.

BOOKS

By Bobbie Lee Holley

Who Rules Your Life? by Prentice A. Meador, Jr. (Austin, Texas: Sweet Publishing Co., 1979), 192 pp., $1.95. Reviewed by Bobbie Lee Holley.

For those who would like a fresh approach to the "kingdom parables" of Jesus, *Who Rules Your Life?* is highly recommended. Three aspects of the book commend it as an important contribution to studies of the Christian life. (1) By providing background material, the author enables the reader to understand the world from which the parables sprang and thereby their original meanings. (2) He interprets the parables in terms of Jesus' definition of the "kingdom within" (Luke 17:21) rather than in terms of institutional trappings. (3) He makes the applications to contemporary life very clear and challenging.

By using the "thematic" approach to this group of Jesus' teachings, Dr. Meador has found within them a well-drawn picture of the nature of the king and the kingdom, has captured anew the excitement of the "kingdom-message" and "kingdom-life," and has called us back to the messenger whose word for us today is still "The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news" (Mark 1:15).

Because the author sees so clearly that we must know who God is and what he is like before we can open our lives to his rule, he also sees clearly that "we must understand the images Jesus used in revealing God to us" (p. 21). If we can understand all this talk about sheep and shepherds, lost animals and boys, fig trees, seeds and tares, treasures in fields, servants, tax collectors, and fish, then perhaps we can get "into the heart of things." Yet more is needed than *just* an understanding of these commonplace elements of life. We must find our way into the "mystery of God" through the spiritual dimensions and new patterns often revealed in the surprise endings of Jesus' stories and the paradoxical juxtapositions of the "homely" images and figures.

Perhaps the most helpful part of the book is the clear and detailed explanation with each parable of the customs and rituals of the culture which Jesus and his audiences knew and from which he drew the "stuff" of his stories. It is precisely at this point that so many have failed to understand the deeper meanings. For example, it is instructive to know about buried treasures in the Middle East, the great contrast between the rich and poor in Jesus' day and the fact that beggars did often wait for the crumbs or pieces of bread under the tables of rich men, the importance of banquets, and unfamiliar wedding customs. In many instances, the essence of Jesus' teaching can be missed completely without this historical context.

Although especially grateful for this help, this reviewer is concerned that the parables of Jesus have become largely academic and literary. While it is generally accepted that *"Jesus intersects real life with his parables"* and that *"the parables of Jesus are permanent"* (pp. 16,17), it must be acknowledged that they do not have the spontaneity in the 20th century that they had in the first century. We still understand about fathers and sons but most of us do not know about sheep and shepherds unless we are informed. Weddings are always with us but we do not know about virgins with oil or wedding garments coming with invitations. So little has been done to retell the parables in terms of credit cards, electric typewriters, mental institutions, marijuana, extra-marital relationships, gasoline shortages, interstate highways, and plumbers. While the author has rendered a valuable service in helping us understand the parables in their initial form, many of them do not intersect the places where we live our lives in this year 1979.

Because of the careful and perceptive grouping of the parables, the reader is confronted with an almost overwhelming sense of God as the loving, forgiving, merciful Father, who cares for the lost, the lonely, the depressed, and, yes, even the sinful and guilty. He offers release, cleansing, renewal, and wholeness that we may know the joy and freedom of being our "true" selves. Because *That's The Way God Is!* Dr. Meador emphasizes over and over the essential concept that the whole of the kingdom experience is grounded solidly in *WHO* God is and that all that we do flows from our relationship with him and our willingness to allow him the ruling place in our hearts and lives. As the parables themselves so often cut right into the heart of our lifestyles, values and principles, so the author brings us up short when he expresses the message in rapier-like terms:

> *It is in trusting, not trying, that God's rule becomes evident.* (p. 149)
>
> *God works through the routine of our lives, in the ordinary details of daily living . . . . If we only look for God in religious settings and on religious days, we will miss many of the quiet, tiny, yet highly significant works of Christ in our lives . . . .* (p. 62)
>
> *. . . what power has a religion that draws the self-righteous and bars sinners, that exalts doctrinal dogmatism and gets nervous about grace, that endlessly repeats its traditions and is silent about self-giving love.* (p. 73)

Only one chapter of the book seems off balance: "Principles of Kingdom-Life." Here Dr. Meador's discussion seems weakest and the least persuasive. One of the reasons probably is that he has been talking about the ethics and principles of kingdom-life all along so that what he includes here is limited and somewhat peripheral. He surely makes a valid point when he suggests that, though Satan has found his way into the kingdom and often hinders its work, it is not *our* responsibility to purify, to act with impatience, to play God. It is rather our task "to be faithful in heart." However, in this chapter, he seems to depart from his initial concept of the kingdom and to equate the "kingdom" with the "church." Further, it would seem that the discussion of "growth" needs a closer look and fuller development. Does "church growth [take] place when faithful workers in the kingdom reproduce the rule of God in other receptive, open lives" (p. 174)? I submit that it is not within the power of the kingdom worker to reproduce such but only within the power of God, although we may indeed assist in the mission.

However, these are minor blemishes. The author has written a helpful and compelling analysis. It should provide inspirational reading for individuals and a worthwhile classroom study. Available from the publisher is a Teacher's Manual/Resource Kit with well-developed guides for each lesson and resources for effective class participation and "life response."

Teachers always live with the hope that their students will surpass them in perception and understanding, especially in living the kingdom-life. This teacher takes special pleasure in recommending to readers of *Mission* the book *Who Rules Your Life?* by her former student Prentice Meador, Jr. She hopes they will find new understandings about the rule of God in their lives as she has found from reading it.

(Note: Surely it was an editor and not my former English student who phrased this subheading: "Who Can We Trust?")

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